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Clegg, S.R.

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# Why Is Organization Theory So Ignorant?

## The Neglect of Total Institutions

STEWART R. CLEGG  
*University of Technology, Sydney*

*Organization theory has, on the whole, failed to adequately address the role that organizations have played in some of the crimes of humanity. The tools to do so have long been available to the discipline, in work by scholars such as Goffman on total institutions, Foucault on disciplinary mechanisms, and Bauman on the Holocaust. The article retrieves the work of these scholars to raise some important questions left begging by much contemporary scholarship.*

**Keywords:** total institutions; power; Holocaust; ethics

### DEFINING IGNORANCE

Organization theory is unaware or uninformed of many things. Such a statement may seem unenlightening, as not only may there be many ways of being unaware, but there is also a great deal to not be informed about. I want to discuss organization theory's ignorance in the sense that it remains largely unaware and uninformed about great intellectuals who have written on some of the most significant organizational issues of our times, even as it celebrates some of the most banal hagiographies by corporate leaders. A dominant theoretical tradition these past 20 years has been institutional theory. Although this stream does have a few major figures, it is not such a fertile field that it can both write out of history

one of its most creative voices—Erving Goffman—and not include one of the most creative voices that it could possibly appropriate—Zygmunt Bauman. Let me introduce each briefly, then bring them together in the analysis of one big issue on which it has displayed a demonstrable record of ignorance. Lacking this inquiry as a constitutive heritage, it is hardly surprising that it has had little of public record to say about the contemporary atrocities of total institutions.

### ERVING GOFFMAN

There are many Goffmans because he had an extraordinarily creative mind. The Goffman I want to discuss is the Goffman (1961) of "total institutions."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article draws on an analysis that comprises chapter six, "The Heart of Darkness," of the recent book by Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson and Nelson Phillips (2006) *Power and Organizations*. The analysis therein comprises a great deal of substantive detail that could not be accommodated in the confines of this short article, touching not only on the substantive details of the Holocaust, but also the cases of the Magdalene Laundries, the Stolen Generation (of Australian Aboriginal children), the German Democratic Republic, and Abu Ghraib.

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Goffman coined the term *total institutions* to refer to a class of concentrated power. In many ways, he anticipated the themes that were later to become popular in Foucault's (1977) work—the power of incarceration, rules, and surveillance—although instead of focusing on design, he studied action, which undoubtedly gave greater acuity to his analyses. We are dealing with what people actually do in Goffman, not what the designers of their institutions would have them do. Institutions are total when they surround the person at every turn: They cannot be escaped, they produce and reproduce the normalcy of life inside the institution—however abnormal it might seem from outside (Deleuze, 1988). Thus, total institutions are organizations that contain the totality of the lives of those who are their members. As such, people within them are cut off from any wider society for a relatively long time, leading an enclosed and formally administered existence. In such contexts, the organization has more or less monopoly control of its members' everyday life. Goffman's argument is that total institutions demonstrate in heightened and condensed form the underlying organizational processes that can be found, albeit in much less extreme cases, in more normal organizations. Goffman chose extremes because the everyday mechanisms of authority and power were much more evident there than in the world of the corporate "organization man" (Whyte, 1960).

Goffman drew on symbolic interactionist thought at a time when structural functionalism was the dominant paradigm in sociology. Moreover, he drew from the same anthropological tradition, as had some of the pioneers of the human relations movement (e.g., Lloyd Warner, but also Mayo and later W. F. Whyte), in introducing what were unconventional ethnographic research methods, all at about the same time that the case study, the ethnographic method, and the importance of the root social science disciplines of anthropology and sociology were being marginalized with the professionalization of organization theory as a disciplinary space in its own right, institutionalized within business schools. The historical moment and the academic space in which Goffman worked are important elements in understanding the silence about his work and the lack of attention given to it until now. In the early 1960s, the systems framework was being locked in place and, of that which it could not, or would not, speak thereof, there was to be silence. Goffman ceased to feature, and total institutions seemed to have missed the institutional bandwagon, which is surprising because total institutions

are a significant type of organizational rationality for eliminating equivocality, with practical lessons in variation, selection, and retention. What is surprising is that so little attention has been paid by organization science to total institutions in general (Burrell's, 1997, retro-organization theory is an exception, as is the discussion in Burrell, 1994; for a contrary view, one should see Weiss, 2000; also see Adams & Balfour, 2001; Hinings & Mauws, 2004).

### ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Bauman is one of the world's most eminent intellectuals, notable for many outstanding contributions to social science, especially *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989). It is a work of great organizational significance precisely because it is a detailed address of history's most infamous example of a total institution, the Nazi death camps. It is a significance that seems to have escaped the majority of writers and authorities in the field, for it is rarely cited in the standard journals.

Bauman's work is not entirely without discussion in the organizations literature (see Clegg, 2002; Grey, 2005, p. 25), but much of the discussion misses the mark. If a central aspect of the Holocaust concerned its organizational possibility, wouldn't one think that this might be a central theme of contemporary organization studies? Wouldn't organization studies want to focus on this case as an exemplification of how what was good in organization could produce what was evil in human action? Might it not want to comb through the records of the Holocaust to identify the trail that the Gestapo left behind or conduct oral histories of the few of its victims to survive?<sup>1</sup> Or should it simply seek absolution for its silence? And the sounds of silence are overwhelming: We know of only one such oral organizational historical account (through the work of Chris Grey, 2005) that explicitly engages with the Holocaust, by Madsen and Willert (1996), who examine the structure of daily life in a Nazi work camp. They do this through conversations with the Danish social psychologist Gunnar Hjejholt, who was arrested by the Germans in 1944 and spent 9 months in the Porta Westfalica concentration camp before being liberated. Much like Bauman, he concludes that the most frightening thing about the camps as a system was the fact that they were, organizationally, not at all unique. Once inside the logic of their system, certain actions became routine. They were much like other systems with which we are all familiar.

Bauman's (1989) argument is that bureaucratic rationality was one of the essential factors that made the Holocaust possible. The mechanics of the Holocaust were made possible by precisely those features of society that made it "civilized," chief among which was rational bureaucracy. du Gay (2000) argues that Bauman's representation of bureaucracy is one-sided because he only refers to the potentially amoral character of bureaucratic procedures and not to the bureaucratic ethos of justice. According to du Gay, racist and party-political convictions, normative and moral sentiments, rather than the application of rules, drove the Nazis. Armbrüster and Gebert (2002) argue that the SS was more a social movement than a rational bureaucracy, animated by spontaneous improvisation rather than rule-driven behavior. The Nazis overthrew the legitimate rule of legal-administrative bureaucracies through politicizing the institutional organs of the state by forced appointments of party members to leading institutional positions (see du Gay, 1999; du Gay, 2000, pp. 48-51). When ends become detached from means, as Grey (2005, p. 25) says, substantive ethics are dangerously weakened.

### **TOTAL INSTITUTIONS: A NEGLECTED CASE STUDY**

By any calculus, the efficient dispatch of millions of state-stigmatized people to their deaths by the German state during World War II was an enormous organizational achievement.<sup>2</sup> It is by no means unique. If the growth of Western modernity is a story of organization, it is also a story of death and destruction wreaked by these same organizational capabilities. The conquest that followed the "discovery" of the Americas or the antipodes, for instance, was another enterprise requiring enormous organizational achievements of ship building, navigation, occupation, extraction, and exploration. Of course, in the case of the Americas, it was military and religious bureaucracy that played the main role. This historical event, considered by scholars such as Dussel (1995) as the beginning of modernity, needs to be reevaluated in organizational terms. What was unique about the Holocaust was that it was much more spatially and temporally concentrated and confined, and the Other that it constituted dwelt in the midst of the categories of reason, not outside, not as something constituted as savage, wild, and alien. The European Other was, in fact, at the heart of some of its most celebrated cultural achievements.

It is not clear who decided that extermination was the appropriate solution to the Jewish question or when they decided. As Higgins (2004) notes, in the disorderly and crony-ridden world of Nazi politics, much as in any organization where to succeed means impressing the boss, senior Nazis who were

rivals tried to outshine each other in Hitler's eyes through their bold initiatives in carrying out what they often had to second-guess as his intentions. Massacring the Jews in one's jurisdiction offered a sure-fire way to impress the boss. Once one crony hit on it the rest followed suit. (p. 87)

The ultimate goal would have seen the extermination of 11 million people; the war's end saw nearly 50% of the target achieved, given that the 6 million also included other categories of deviance—the feeble, homosexuals, communists, gypsies, and so on. Six million bodies disappeared from the face of the earth, including 1.5 million children.

Rose (1999) suggests that the actual power of Nazism "was its capacity to render itself technical, to connect itself up with all manner of technologies capable of implementing its nightmarish dreams into everyday existence" (p. 26). What were these techniques? Construct an organizational politics premised on identity/nonidentity and use it to concentrate and marshal bodies on the basis of clearly inscribed identities in a specific space and then strip members of markers of individual identity. Delegate authorities to enact centrally conceived power projects and use expert knowledge to render power efficiently by paying systematic attention to means while accepting ends by applying intrinsically instrumental and value-free science. Construct a factory flow of power—with efficiencies of scale in processing inputs and creating outputs and have the highest authority sanction the organizational action in question. Routinize actions that enact organizational power and dehumanize those subject to power, and always be selective in your mercies. Maintain a distance between the designated exercisers and subjects of power: Divisions of labor in complex chains of power enable elites to maintain distance from power's effects. Make technique paramount in the dispatch of power: Obedience to power is encouraged where organization work is a ceaseless round of technical activity with little room for reflection. Those who are the subjects of power should be made complicit in its exercise. Be convinced that the regime of the total institution is the

best for all concerned; both those in and those out-with—wrap its purpose in the rhetoric of being in the “real” interests of both the other and the society at large. Minimize the possibilities of escape attempts by spying on everyone and making everyone aware that they may be being spied on and informed about. Lock members inside, keep outsiders outside, and systematically misrepresent the reality of the situation. Finally, reward the institution’s keepers with perks and benefits (see Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillis, 2006, pp. 152-180).

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, as the total institution, such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, has once again become a part of the public policy apparatus to be deployed by governments against those others that they create, shouldn’t an ethically relevant and morally concerned organization scholarship have something to say and be able to draw on precedents to do so? Well, if it had many precedents, it might. Given their absence, and the absence of writers such as Goffman or Bauman, who might provide compass points, the silence from the organization science community about such public policy is perhaps not surprising, even as it remains ignorant. Organization theory has a great deal to be ignorant about, unfortunately. That’s the big issue: In the small world of its theory, it hardly seeks to make a difference to the ethics of practice. Histories never experienced and events not remembered cannot illuminate total institutions that go unremarked by an organization science that ought to be best able to address them.

## NOTES

1. There are practical reasons why such research is important. Many victims (or their relatives) of Gestapo terror are still fighting for compensation, so such systematic organizational oral histories have not only important ethical but also legal significance. In the face of missing formal evidence about Gestapo crimes, gaining such compensation has proved a rather hopeless cause for many of the victims or their representatives. Until very recently, most slave laborers who worked for German companies during World War II fought in vain for compensation. Only about a year ago, 60 years after the events, was a fund set up to compensate the victims. Needless to say, many of the latter have meanwhile died.

2. The Prussian elite constructed the German project of modernity exclusively in terms of an ethnic nationalism that

demanded its own strangers, its own outsiders, and its own enemies to be viable, a role that Jews had been playing for centuries. They were shortly to be cast the starring role in the horror that fascism was to orchestrate. And *orchestrate* is an apt verb: The Nazi state was a despotism that relied on stage management, propaganda, and spectacle as its major organizational devices for creating unity, coherence, and support to eliminate not only Jewish people but also polyphony more generally. The Third Reich was a state developed on the basis of power and myth. Power came from National Socialists’ command after 1933 of the state apparatuses. German history provided the myth it orchestrated: a myth of the German *volk* and its supremacy, which provided “values and meaning and ideas and plans and stratagems and alternative forms of social organization . . . an oversimplified representation of a more complex reality” (Bailey, 1977, p. 7). It created a cosmos within which vast but minutely particularized games of exchange and metamorphosis could occur (Zeraffa, 1976, p. 77). The signifier of the myth, the ascendant Reich, presented itself as belonging to a history of the German people. In this way, its meaning was already complete; it postulated a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, and decisions, and a past destiny that had been denied, most notably by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, projected into the future (Barthes, 1957). When this destiny assumed a form that captured the state, it rapidly assumed the form of caricature, pastiche, and elaborate stage-managed symbols. Nationalism had been achieved and imposed from above by elites, positioning the German nation as a people of manifest destiny, which World War I stopped in its tracks. When it was revived by Hitler (1924), the Nazis changed the nationalist project from one that was defined by elites to one that was to be defined in more popular ways. It became a popular project in a context where, after the collapse of the Weimar Republic, there was little in the way of a state or civil society and few national or civic sources of moral values, education, or authority outside of the National Socialist Party and little in the way of “constitutionalism, the rule of law, democracy, civil society, the institutions to negotiate cultural and racial diversity. . . . There was nothing to prevent the normalization of discrimination and oppression” (Higgins, 2004, p. 90). At the level of micro politics, the Nazis sought to implement their myths—based on blood, race, and territory—in all the spheres of everyday life—the family, the youth group, the neighborhood—through capillaries of power such as the Hitler Youth (see Rose, 1999, pp. 16-25).

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**STEWART R. CLEGG** is a professor at the University of Technology, Sydney, and director of ICAN Research-Innovative Collaborations, Alliances and Networks, a Key University Research Centre. He also holds a professorial position at Aston Business School, United Kingdom, is a visiting professor at Maastricht University Business Faculty, and is an international fellow in discourse and management theory in the Centre of Comparative Social Studies, Free University of Amsterdam. He has recently published *Managing and Organizations: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (2005), with Martin Kornberger and Tyrone Pittis.